

FREEDOM

J. C. SMUTS

St. Andrews

OCT. 17th 1934

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by

General the Right Hon.

J. C. SMUTS

Being the Rectorial Address delivered
at St. Andrews University
on Oct. 17th, 1934

τὸ εὐδαιμον τὸ ἐλεύθερον
τὸ δ' ἐλεύθερον τὸ εὐψυχον

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We fight not for glory, nor for wealth,
nor for honour, but for that freedom
which no good man will surrender but
with his life.

*From the Arbroath Manifesto, sent by the Nobles
and Commons of Scotland to the Pope, in 1320.*

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AND SO I have at long last arrived at St. Andrews, three years after you elected me as your Rector. Although it is probably an unprecedented event for a rector to be installed at the end of his term of office, all the circumstances connected with my election have been most unusual. Today I am happy and grateful that I have arrived in time for my Installation, to thank you and pay my respects to those who so greatly honoured me three years ago.

I come not only as your Rector, but also as an unofficial ambassador from my young nation in South Africa. I bring you the sincere greetings of South Africa and her young Universities—themselves so largely the work of Scotsmen—the affectionate greetings of the youngest of nations in the far South to the Four Nations in the North.

I shall not delay to apologize for my late arrival. You, the students of the University, chose

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me as your Rector in that memorable election three years ago, well knowing the difficulties, political and geographical, of my position. To-day my first word to you will be one of sincere and grateful thanks for the honour you did me. Of such recognition as has come to me in the course of life, I value not least this spontaneous honour which was so unexpectedly thrust on me by the young men and women of this University. Under all the circumstances it was a magnificent gesture, and the memory of it will always remain a precious possession with me.

That election had one pang for me—one deep regret. It is that on that occasion I was pitted against that fine and typical Scotsman, Lord Inchcape, alas no more with us. Of him and his work and great public services during and after the Great War I had the highest opinion, and if I had known that he was to be my opponent, I might never have allowed my name to go forward in the election. Peace to his honoured memory!

Here once more the contest was decided not on

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merit. And so is history made. Last year in London, our Principal, Sir James Irvine, in relating to me some of the incidents of that election, delicately hinted that I was not chosen for my merits as a public man, but because of my Boer past, and because of the incurably romantic character of the Scots! A brother Rector, my friend Walter Elliot, in his recent Rectorial Address at Aberdeen, mentioned three outstanding characteristics of the Scots—industry, fury, romance. I have been mixed up with Scotsmen most of my life, and at various times I have alternately profited and suffered from these characteristics of yours. Today I am most impressed by the romance of the situation.

The Principal's remark carried my mind back to the first occasion I had heard mention of the Scots. My people were farming folk in the old Cape Colony, and when I was a very small boy, I sometimes frequented the company of an old Hottentot shepherd of my father who used to delight us with stories from his native folklore. He

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had also been to several Kaffir wars, and could tell me of his own wonderful feats of arms in those border campaigns. I listened enthralled. At that time the first Boer war—the one that ended at Majuba—was going on, and I remember asking him who he thought would win. From his great military knowledge he had no doubt that the English would win. I asked him whether he thought the English were the greatest nation in the world, and he replied 'No'; there was one nation still greater who lived in the farthest land in the world; they were the greatest of all nations and even the English were very much afraid of them. They were called the 'Scots'. That was my first introduction to the Scots—and such was my introducer! The Principal must be right. Now, 54 years after those historic conversations, I find myself the Rector of a famous University of this land—of romance, as the Principal calls it, of the greatest of peoples, as old Adam the Hottentot called it.

I shall not venture to flatter you, and so I am

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bound to confess that in the sense of greatness meant by old Adam, he was wrong about Scotland. I have since learnt that the Scots are in fact one of the small nations, although I do not intend to say so outside Scotland. To me and to us in our humble beginnings in South Africa, you are (if I may say so) all the dearer on that account. We small ones of the earth feel mutually drawn to each other in a world which has largely gone crazy with the problems of size and scale. Both of us have learnt from Athens and Jerusalem that the real values are no respecters of dimensions. There are also other ties which link us together in common interests and sympathies of a more intimate character. There are the ties of kinship in the distant past, of a common religious faith, of common moral ideals. John Calvin and John Knox both belong to our invisible foundations, and there remains a community of spiritual outlook and moral values between our peoples which are among the most precious things we bring from our past.

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In particular we both cherish and practise liberty as the fundamental rule of life. While inclined by our religious traditions to question the freedom of the will as a metaphysical principle, we both make amends by applying freedom with all the more energy as the practical rule of life. We decline to submerge the individual in the state or the group, and we base our organisation of the state and society on individual freedom and the free initiative of the citizen. Our outlook remains that of free men in a world in which the tradition of freedom is, alas! steadily weakening.

You in Scotland have a great story behind you, while we in Africa are only at the beginning of things. The best I could wish for my own young people, now beginning to set up house on its own account, is that its future story may not be so very different in outline from yours. Like you, we have started in trouble and bloodshed. We still have our tribes as you have had your clans. We are trying to come and grow together in nationhood, just as you have gloriously suc-

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ceeded in your own union and internal peace-making. But more: you have set us an example how, while living your own life and maintaining and developing your own peculiar characteristics, to join in the larger life of a wider group, and thereby to make your contribution to the upbuilding of human civilisation and the establishment of a Commonwealth which today secures peace and opportunities for the good life to one-fourth of the human race.

Your success in this wider theatre has gone far to justify old Adam the Hottentot in his high opinion of the Scots. You have overflowed your narrow national boundaries and have reinforced human life and endeavour all over the world, and most of all in undeveloped countries like those on the African Continent. Think of David Livingstone, the struggling Scots lad, the harassed missionary, the penniless explorer, whose monument has just gone up at the Victoria Falls. And he is but a type of many others. All over my Continent stand the great beacons of progress, erected

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by Scots pioneers, in the Christian mission, administration, commerce, industry, transport, mining and engineering. The spoor of Scotsmen is indeed found everywhere, and they are probably the greatest pioneers of the modern world. Our world is the better for their labours. And I am told Scotland is still full of this great breed. What a record! I have continually held it up to my own people as a great example to follow. We in our small way have also started as pioneers, as a nation of Voortrekkers on our Continent. We also have suffered at the hands of the English; we also have ended by making the grand compromise with them, which has been so successful in your case. May we have something of your luck in the great experiment!

But, as I said, we are still at the beginnings. At this moment we are trying to lay the enduring basis of peace in our national life. Nowhere in the Dominions has more good blood been shed. Nowhere has the political aftermath of war been more unpleasant and bitter. But we believe we

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are at last approaching the end of that chapter. In our politics and our racial relations we are at present concluding the grand pact of union and of fusion. The South African people have responded to the lead of their party chiefs in a spirit which is truly wonderful and which shows that the time is ripe for a great change. I am indeed very proud of my countrymen of both races. In a world of racial cleavages, in a world of growing economic nationalism and antagonisms, South Africa is busy closing up her ranks and building an enduring peace. Africa is once more true to her reputation for novelty. May she also yet find the formula of understanding and co-operation between white and black! The young nations of the world have their own contribution to make to the human causes, and they can best begin to do so by setting their house in order and pledging themselves afresh to the great human principles on which our Western civilisation rests. The task may be a far more difficult one for them under the new conditions than our fathers found it.

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In the Old World—in the motherlands of our European civilisation—those principles are no longer considered sacrosanct and are being widely challenged and even openly defied. The things which Thomas Carlyle in the past century classed with the eternal verities are today being relegated to his limbo of old clothes. With the cataclysm of the Great War the whole European order threatens to collapse and in the ruins to involve the most precious treasures along with the accumulated rubbish of the nineteenth century. The catastrophe has been so sudden and unexpected that we have not yet had time to do the necessary sifting, to save the treasures from the waste of the middenheap. There has been no time yet to readjust our viewpoints, to take new bearings.

Mankind stands perplexed and baffled before the new situation and the new problems. There is fear, a sense of insecurity among the nations. The primeval dread of the unknown is once more upon us, and the dark irrational forces of the past

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are once more stalking forward from their obscure background. Besides, we have the paralysing sense of having failed. The fair promise of nineteenth-century progress has ended in defeat and frustration and disillusion. There has been a double failure. There was the failure of the Great War, which seemed to be a negation of the principles on which the comity of our Christian civilisation had been laboriously built up. And there was the no less deep and poignant failure of the peace, when at a vital moment, a critical occasion for western civilisation, human goodwill appeared to be unequal to its task, and the great hopes for a better ordering of the future were rudely disappointed. Such a chance comes but once in a whole era of history, and we missed it. The politics which is founded on despair or desperation, which covers many European countries today with dangerous political experiments, and in others endangers peace and prevents disarmament, has sprung largely from this second failure and the slaughter of ideals which it in-

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volved—a slaughter no less grievous than that of our millions in the war. There was this double human failure, which has wounded mankind, so to say, in its very soul, and left it with insufficient faith and confidence to sustain the causes and the institutions which are essential to our civilisation.

No wonder there is abroad a spirit of pessimism and even of despair. So many high hopes have been dashed. Science, the proudest product of the human reason, the greatest instrument of human progress, the voice of God to our day and generation, has at the same time become the most dangerous weapon for our self-destruction. Democracy with its promise of international peace, has been no better guarantee against war than the old dynastic rule of kings. International trade and commerce, which were supposed to pave a sure way to intercourse and better understanding among the nations and a peaceful world, have instead led to economic nationalism, and thereby opened up new sources of international friction and isolation. One by one the vast expectations

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born of the progress of the last century have been falsified, and today we face a bleak world, bereft of the vast capital destroyed in the war, even doubting the principles on which our civilisation is built, without confidence in ourselves and our destiny, and with no clear vision of the road before us. We console ourselves with the truism that we are living in most interesting times. But the hard truth is that they are the most anxious and critical times which mankind has faced for many centuries. Speaking here today to you, the young people of this University, an old hard-bitten campaigner like myself might be asked how I view the prospect before us, what message I have from my own experience, as one who has gone through the immense labours of our generation, to those who now stand on the threshold of this strange new world. I greatly appreciate the opportunity of giving my impressions—to bear my testimony, as the old evangelicals used to say—to share with you, as the Oxford groupers of today say.

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My fundamental impression of life I can give you in words which most of you know from your childhood. They occur on the first page of the greatest book in the world. They come from the youth of the world, and today in its maturity they are truer than ever. The world is good. This is a good world. We need not approve of all the items in it, nor of all the individuals in it; but the world itself, which is more than its parts or individuals, which has a soul, a spirit, a fundamental relation to each of us deeper than all other relations—is a friendly world. It has borne us; it has carried us onward; it has humanised us and guided our faltering footsteps throughout the long and slow advance; it has endowed us with strength and courage. It has proved a real vale of soul-making for us humans, and created for us visions, dreams, ideals which are still further moulding us on eternal lines. It is full of tangles, of ups and downs. There is always enough to bite on, to sharpen wits on, to test our courage and manhood.

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It is indeed a world built for heroism, but also for beauty, tenderness, mercy. I have passed through pretty rough passages; I have sampled the world and human nature at many points, and I have learnt that it takes all sorts to make a world. But through it all my conviction has only deepened, that there is nothing in the nature of things which is alien to what is best in us. There is no malign fatalism which makes fools of us in our dark striving towards the good. On the contrary, what is highest in us is deepest in the nature of things, and as virtue is its own reward, so life carries its own sanctions and the guarantee of its own highest fulfilments and perfections. That is my ultimate Credo; and it is not founded on hearsay, but on my firsthand experience in that cross-section of the world which I have lived through. This is no doubt a slender basis of fact for so large a conclusion. But the final convictions are not inductions from experience but insights into it. I remain at heart an optimist.

In the events of our times I see much ground

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for anxiety but none for real pessimism. Human nature is not so lop-sided and ill-balanced that we need look on our civilisation as doomed. It has survived great shocks in the past and will survive this one too. In spite of all its defects, the human mind has already solved most difficult problems in national organisation and even begun to lay the foundations of an international order. These are long-range problems and the pessimist makes a big mistake in taking a short-range view of them. Looking at the broad human situation today, one gets a very different impression from that of the pessimist. In spite of the international friction of today, there is more real goodwill and good feeling in the world than ever before. Contact with the common people everywhere is sufficient to convince us of that fact. There is no decadence abroad, but everywhere the signs of new life, and of new forces on the move. In all our feverish activity, I see no spirit of defeatism. Indeed, much in the purely human situation is deeply encouraging. There is surely

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nothing wrong with youth in its frankness, its sincerity and open-eyed outlook on the world, undaunted by the failures of the past, by the spectres of the future. Mankind is no longer held back by the ancient taboos, but is earnestly, valiantly exploring new ways to a better future.

Science has perhaps made more fundamental progress in the last thirty years than in the preceding two thousand. In particular, as is today commonly recognised, the problem of food shortage, of starvation and famine, the most dreadful spectre of all history, is at last yielding to science, and the most fruitful cause of war in the past is thus being eliminated. Instead we are now oppressed with the novel problems of plenty, the solution of which will in due course mean not only the passing of war, but of grinding poverty and slavish toil for the masses of mankind. In these and other ways, the scientific results of the last third of a century will come in the future vastly to overshadow in importance the losses and

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dislocations of the Great War which still bulk so large in our view.

I am stressing what I call the human situation because in the last resort that is the only thing that matters. For the time being we may be more impressed by great world-shaking events like the Great War and the vast experiments in government which have followed it. But it is only their human values that survive. Men and women alone matter in the last resort. From this point of view is it not significant that the Great War with all its suffering and disillusion has not availed to dim the ardour and undermine the courage of the human spirit? The generation that suffered the greatest tragedy of history and knew suffering, sorrow and loss as no previous generation of men had known, faced the world thereafter with spirit uncrushed, with head unbowed, with a heightened energy and a courage which makes Man of our period a sublime figure for all time. During the War he carried burdens and faced up to a situation supposed to be too much for hu-

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man nature, and after the War, in spite of the loss of millions of his best, he made a spurt in progress to which history shows no parallel. Where is the decadence? There is no reason here for tears. Rather let us be proud and grateful that we have in our generation been privileged to see the human soul stand probably the most awful ordeal to which it has ever been subjected in its long history.

So much for the past—what of the future? Here there are certain real and imminent dangers to which I wish briefly to refer. I do not agree with the common view that we are on the verge of another great war. The scaremongers are doing their best to create a war atmosphere and are thereby doing very serious mischief. But in spite of them and of the present lamentable failure of disarmament; in spite also of the vogue of silly drilling and strutting about in uniforms and in shirts of various colours, I do not find the real war temper anywhere. Nor do I find the necessary material conditions which alone make the

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waging of a modern war possible. And in the meantime every new scientific discovery, every new war invention is making real modern war more and more improbable. More and more will statesmen pause before they loosen the new horrors on their peoples.

But discounting the serious risk of war in the near future, there still remain other grave dangers facing our civilisation. There is a decay of principles, which is eating at the very vitals of free government, and to me that appears to be a far more serious danger to our future than the risk of war. There is today a decay of the individual's responsibility and share in government which seems to strike at the roots of our human advance.

For me the individual is basic to any world-order that is worth while. Individual freedom, individual independence of mind, individual participation in the difficult work of government seems to me essential to all true progress. Yet today the individual seems more and more at a discount in the new experiments in government

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which are being tried out. The sturdy individualism which inspired progress in the past, which made Rome, which made Scotland, which has created all our best human values, seems to be decaying in the atmosphere of confusion and disillusion of our day. Men and women have suffered until they are abdicating their rights as individuals. In their misery and helplessness they are surrendering to the mass will which leads straight to autocracy. The feebleness of continental democracy, its ineffectiveness in a crisis calling for swift and decisive action, has contributed to this defeatist attitude of the individual. And the result is that, with this individualist prop of freedom gone, freedom itself seems to be in danger. A new sort of hero-worship is arising, very different from that which Carlyle preached, and which saps the very foundations of individuality and makes the individual prostrate himself before his national leader as before a god.

That way extreme danger lies. The road to

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Caesarism lies clear. The disappearance of the sturdy, independent-minded, freedom-loving individual, and his replacement by a servile standardised mass-mentality is the greatest human menace of our time. Here we reach what I firmly believe is the heart of the problem, the issue round which the greatest battles of this and the coming generation will be fought—if the cause of our civilisation is not to suffer a setback. As an old soldier in this cause I hope you will excuse me when I state thus bluntly my views on the dangers ahead as I see them. The issue of freedom, the most fundamental issue of all our civilisation, is once more squarely raised by what is happening in the world, and cannot be evaded. The danger signals are up in many colours and in many lands. The new Tyranny, disguised in attractive patriotic colours, is enticing youth everywhere into its service. Freedom must make a great counterstroke to save itself and our fair western civilisation. Once more the heroic call is coming to our youth. The fight for human freedom is indeed

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the supreme issue of the future, as it has always been in the past.

Although the ancient homelands of constitutional liberty in the west are not yet seriously affected, we have to confess sadly that over large parts of Europe the cult of force—what in the Great War we used to call Prussianism—has for the moment triumphed. Popular self-government and parliaments are disappearing. The guarantees for private rights and civil liberties are going. Minorities are trampled upon; dissident views are not tolerated and are forcibly suppressed. For those who do not choose to fall into line there is the concentration camp, the distant labour camp in the wilds, or on the islands of the sea. Intellectual freedom is disappearing with political freedom. Freedom of conscience, of speech, of the press, of thought and teaching is in extreme danger. One party in the State usurps power, and suppresses its opponents and becomes the State. The press is made to write to order, and public opinion is manufactured for

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the support of the autocracy. Even freedom of religion is no longer safe, and religious persecution, after being long considered obsolete, once more shows its horrid head.

In many if not most European countries the standard of human freedom has already fallen far below that of the nineteenth century. Perhaps I do not exaggerate when I say that of what we call liberty in its full human meaning—freedom of thought, speech, action, self-expression—there is today less in Europe than there has been during the last two thousand years. In ancient Athens, in ancient Rome there was at any rate freedom of thought and speculation and teaching, and generally of religion. Now in the twentieth century, intolerance threatens once more to become the order of the day. In spite of all our scientific expansion our essential human rights are contracting. The new Dictatorship is nothing but the old Tyranny writ large. I fear the new Tyranny more than I fear the danger of another Great War. Tyranny is infectious. As Burke said, it is a weed

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which grows in all soils, and it is its nature to spread. Even in this island-home of constitutional freedom, I do not know that you are quite immune. Democracy seems to be going out of favour and out of fashion, and unless its methods can be overhauled, its unpopularity may involve the cause of liberty itself.

Let me state quite clearly that I am not against new experiments in human government. The extraordinary difficulties and complications of modern government call for revised methods and new experiments. What I am here concerned with is the serious threat to freedom and self-government which is involved in the new experiments now being tried out on the Continent. They are all based on a denial of liberty—not as a temporary expedient, but on principle. The assertion that they aim at the eventual enlargement of liberty is vain, in view of the fundamental negation of liberty on which they are based, and the absorption of the individual by the State or the group which is their real objective.

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I maintain that such a basis of human government is an anachronism, and a moral impossibility in our western civilisation. The denial of free human rights must in the long run lead to a cataclysm. The machinery of Democracy may call, and does call, for reform, and the methods of enabling the people to exercise in freedom their influence on government may have to be altered from those at present in vogue. Our legislative machine especially is out of gear. But to suppose that in the modern world you can dispense with freedom in human government, that you can govern without the free consent of the governed, is to fly in the face of decent human nature as well as the facts of history. Dictatorship can only be tolerated as a temporary expedient, and can never be a permanent substitute for free self-government. Freedom is the most ineradicable craving of human nature. Without it peace, contentment, and happiness, even manhood itself, are not possible. The declaration of Pericles in his great Funeral Oration holds for all time:

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τὸ εὐδαιμον τὸ ἐλεύθερον
τὸ δ' ἐλεύθερον τὸ εὐψυχον.

'Happiness is Freedom, and Freedom is Courage.' That is the fundamental equation of all politics and all human government, and any system which ignores it is built on sand.

The denial of what is deepest in our spiritual nature must lead to a materialist mechanist civilisation where economic goods take the place of the spiritual values, and where mankind can at best only achieve a distorted and stunted growth, a sort of substitute or 'Ersatz' humanity—very different from that which has been our ideal through the ages.

In these days of widespread backsliding, of lukewarmness or downright disloyalty to our fundamental human ideals, the countries which have always been in the forefront of the historic fight for human liberty have a very grave duty imposed on them. They cannot refuse the challenge of the times. They dare not abandon the cause which our forefathers rightly placed along

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with religion itself as calling for the highest loyalty and the greatest sacrifices. For even more than political principles and constitutions are at stake. The vision of freedom, of the liberation of the human spirit from its primeval bondage is perhaps the greatest light which has yet dawned on our human horizon. It forms the real spur of progress, the lure of our race in its ceaseless striving towards the future. According to Plato, the movement of the world is from brute force to freedom, from fate or necessity to reason, from compulsion to persuasion. Man's progress through the ages is from a régime of domination to one of understanding, consent and free co-operation. That great movement of liberation is the glory of our past. It is also our inescapable programme for the future.

More and more the will to freedom should be our real motive power. In the uncertainties and paralysing perplexities of today, Freedom should not merely be our abstract political ideal but a creative force inspiring our young men and women to noble action.

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Inner freedom and harmony of soul; social freedom and equality before the law as the foundation of the State; international freedom in the rule of peace and justice: these should be the creative ideals of the new age, instead of the sterilizing repressions of the past, and the still more sterilizing tyrannies which are forging new shackles for the human spirit. Creative Freedom is the watchword of the new order, to the realization of which we should bend our energies.

I have no doubt that the present disquieting phase will pass, and that a new renaissance of the European spirit will follow. What a glorious opportunity to our youth today to live in times when the situation is once more fluid and the world is once more in the remaking! Are we going to leave a free field to those who threaten our fundamental human ideals and our proudest heritage from the past? Or are we going to join in the battle—the age-long battle which has been going forward from the dawn of history—for the breaking of our bonds and the enlargement of our

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range of free choice and free action? Remembering the great appeal of Pericles which rings through the ages, let us seek our happiness in freedom, and bravely do our part in hastening the coming of the great day of Freedom.